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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 007483

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER FR

SUBJECT: URBAN VIOLENCE TAKES A DOWNTURN; POLICE
PESSIMISTIC BUT REPORT NO EVIDENCE OF "INTIFADA" IN FRANCE

REF: A. PARIS 7084

¶B. PARIS POINTS OF OCT 24

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Violence in France's suburban ghettos, perpetrated primarily by marginalized and underprivileged youth (often but not exclusively of Muslim origin), continues to simmer despite the current calm. A recent downturn in violence appears attributable to widespread shock and horror following the near death of a young French-Senegalese woman who remains in critical condition after being severely burned in a bus hijacking on October 28. Senior police and gendarmerie officials told poloff on November 14 that law enforcement agencies are convinced that any number of events (though more likely police involvement in the death or serious injury of a young man), could act as a catalyst for a resurgence of violence, and that police and gendarmerie capabilities could only provide temporary relief.

¶2. (C) Summary Continued: Our police and gendarmerie contacts were quick to underline that in the five years since Nicolas Sarkozy was named Minister of Interior, the overall crime rate has dropped. Law enforcement agencies had taken some key steps in addressing the rise in urban violence, we were told, but broader social and economic causal factors need to be addressed as well. This was particularly true for the minors who made up 45 percent of those arrested in urban violence. Our contacts agreed that there is currently no reason to believe that the violence is organized, and did not credit assertions hyped in the international media of an "intifada" in France. Media reports, cell phones, and the internet, they said, have given youth a quick way to call others spontaneously to the scene, and give an impetus for copycat activities. End Summary

¶3. (C) Despite the current downturn in violence, Luc Presson, the Senior Counselor for Public Order to the Director General for the National Police (DGPN) and Colonel Jean-Marie Charpentier, Senior Gendarmerie Counselor for Mobile Forces, told poloff on November 14 that law enforcement officials are convinced that any number of events could serve as a catalyst for further widespread violence like the suburban unrest of November 2005 and the much less intense, but still significant, activity surrounding the one year anniversary in October/November 2006. Police, he said, are under-equipped to handle the overall situation. With minors accounting for 45 percent of arrests in "sensitive zones," the police are not only disturbed by having to arrest boys as young as age 11, but unsure of how to proceed with police action against such young offenders. "We are not a day care center," Presson said, "These kids need some education and discipline from their families."

¶4. (C) While readily admitting that urban violence is a serious problem, Presson and Charpentier noted that French culture fortunately does not encourage possession and use of firearms, keeping serious injuries and fatalities of law enforcement officers and offenders at relatively low levels. According to press reports, police have been more frequent targets in the past year; while there have been some serious injuries, no deaths were reported. The physical destruction and psychological effects of the violence, Presson stressed, was clearly taking its toll on police and gendarmes who were often left "in the line of fire." (Comment: Embassy officers, in visits to some suburbs, have noted that the physical destruction has left residents without local commerce to fulfill basic needs, and left government institutions as the only local targets for vandalism. Mayors in affected areas have publicly called on the state to rebuild community centers and other government backed institutions that have been vandalized or destroyed in recent

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years, and left communities with little in the way of recreation for local youth. (End Comment)

¶5. (C) Presson was rather pessimistic about future violence, saying that while law enforcement agencies could refine their tactics so as to limit confrontation and increase prevention, there were clearly larger societal issues that had to be addressed. Police, he insisted, had taken some important steps in curbing violence, but could not take credit for the current downturn. Since last year, they had instituted indicators which measured the degree and type of violence, and enabled them to more effectively respond to developing situations. Additional training was being given to police and gendarmerie mobile rapid reaction forces, but a lack of seasoned officers with the appropriate skill set made the current situation particularly challenging. The Ministry of Interior, Presson noted, had begun to restrict the amount of information readily available to journalists when this information, if revealed, might have the effect of encouraging further violence. The numbers of cars burned each day (now somewhere from 5 to 100), for example, are no longer regularly shared, out of concern that youth would attempt to beat daily records. (Comment: Presson was convinced, perhaps naively so, that the upswing of the November 2005 violence was due in large part to the reporting of what he termed "irresponsible" journalists. End Comment.)

¶6. (C) When asked about Michel Thooris, (Secretary General of the "Action-Police" union) comments about an "intifada" that were widely reported in English-language media, both Presson and Charpentier were taken by surprise. They said they were not aware of the comments or Thooris but they had vaguely heard of Action-Police and thought it was an extreme right group (see ref B for additional information on Michel Thooris, an ardent supporter of the Front National, an extreme right wing political party, whose "union" currently counts no members and only a handful of supporters -- he and

a few friends who founded the group). Both Presson and Charpentier agreed that there was currently no reason to believe that the violence in the suburbs was organized. There were certainly no indications that criminal activity was linked to religious movements. If anything, they said, irresponsible media reports, cell phones, and the internet have given youth a quick way to call others spontaneously to the scene or create the impetus for copycat activities as evidenced by the October 2006 bus hijackings that spread across France after a great deal of media attention. Charpentier added that the last time he was aware of criminals invoking Islam was at the outset of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

¶7. (U) Note: National police are responsible for urban centers with over 15,000 inhabitants, while both the National Police and the Gendarmerie maintain mobile crisis response units. Both agencies cooperate on domestic security under the auspices the Ministry of Interior; however the Gendarmerie is a military force technically tied to the Ministry of Defense and thus not unionized.)

¶8. (C) Comment: While overall crime rates in France have reportedly decreased in recent years; violence in the zones which saw the greatest unrest in November 2005 have not followed this trend. "Urban violence" in "sensitive zones" has posed new challenges to law enforcement agencies who remain under-equipped to effectively contain periodic manifestations of the simmering discontent in low-income suburban projects. While the GOF continues to look for ways to address the deeper societal causes of the violence, law enforcement agencies will have to improve surveillance and policing methods. With no prospect of a significant improvement in living conditions anytime soon, GOF officials will continue monitoring the situation for any evidence that Islamic extremists may attempt to exploit the general malaise

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among youth of Muslim origin. End Comment.

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